

ROANOKE TIMES

STATELY HOMECOMINGS

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Summary: A state veterans cemetery is set to be built, perhaps by 2009, in Pulaski County near Dublin as Virginia's third such facility.

AMELIA -- Three acres have small white or flat markers showing the resting places of veterans and some of their family members, but most of the 126-acre Virginia Veterans Cemetery at Amelia looks more like a public park.

The grass is mowed, the pathways are graveled, the trees and flowering plants form a restful backdrop, and the donated marble benches provide places to sit and enjoy the view.

There is an office building and a small churchlike chapel, a road and parking area. There is also a workshop building, but it is out of sight. The cemetery markers are lined up like disciplined troops in a crack marching unit.

This was the first state veterans cemetery in Virginia, opening about nine years ago. A second larger one opened in Suffolk in 2004. And a third is set to be built in Pulaski County near Dublin on a 79-acre tract belonging to the Radford Army Ammunition Plant, perhaps by 2009.

"It is a real benefit to the families," said Andy Corbett, an Amelia funeral director who grew up in Troutville and is familiar with Southwest Virginia. "I know that the need exists in that part of the state as well as it does here."

Rep. Rick Boucher, D-Abingdon, announced on May 12 that his bill authorizing the transfer of federal land to the state for the cemetery had been approved in the House of Representatives. But it must still go through the Senate and be signed by the president.

Dan Kemano, the state veterans cemetery administrator, and Cindy Van Bibber, superintendent of the Amelia facility, are working on a budget for Dublin. It will probably be ready for submission in the next few months. Then the state must work up a design and engineering plan, which must be approved at the federal level because that is where the grant comes from to build the facility.

"The folks down in Southwest Virginia, the whole veterans' group down there, they've spent a good deal of time trying to get one positioned down there," Kemano said. "Our biggest

concerns are that everyone understand it doesn't happen immediately."

The cemetery belongs to the federal government until the day it is commissioned, and then it belongs to the state, which handles its operations. The entire cemetery site will not be built out initially, but in phases as needed.

The local impact of the cemeteries plays out in several ways.

Amelia had 260 funerals during its last fiscal year, while Suffolk, which is located in the midst of military bases, had 460.

This translates to business for local restaurants and motels, Kemano said.

The cemeteries try to have local companies involved in bidding for equipment, Kemano said. "Plus we're going to employ local people."

The veterans cemeteries differ from traditional burial places. Small markers are used instead of gravestones, and funerals are conducted differently.

For example, there is no graveside service. Families are not present at the burial, because the equipment used often on several graves in succession could be a safety hazard.

"It's an efficient way when you're doing numbers, larger numbers," Kemano said. "It's military. It's organized. That's what these military cemeteries are like."

The service, with military honors handled by the funeral home, is conducted at the chapel or commitment shelter. Then the party leaves and assembles somewhere else while the burial takes place. After that, they can be escorted to the grave site. Maps are furnished so they can locate the marker on later visits.

The Dublin cemetery likely will have a commitment shelter that is open on the sides, as Suffolk does, rather than an enclosed chapel such as the one at Amelia that must be cooled and heated.

Virginia and other states have added their own veterans cemeteries because national ones are too far away for convenient visits, even Arlington and Quantico in Virginia. Most follow the same rules as the national cemeteries, although the one at Arlington is a special case.

"Arlington is run by the Department of Defense, and they occasionally have graveside services," Van Bibber said. "Arlington's a special entity all of its own." Its rules change occasionally depending on available space, she said. "That's why we tell folks, 'Call them and find out,' " she said, when she gets inquiries about using it.

Other family members can also be buried in a veterans cemetery. Graves are reopened and lowered, allowing new caskets to go on top of the old one without enlarging the site.

The number of veterans living in a region such as Southwest Virginia can be misleading as to how many will use the cemetery, Kemano cautioned. Many have already pre-bought burial sites in regular cemeteries. Some have already lost loved ones and want to be buried next to them.

"You can't base everything on numbers," he said. "And that's what we're trying to be cautious of in Dublin."

On the Web: www.dvs.virginia.gov

State veterans cemeteries

n Any member of the armed forces who was a resident of Virginia when he or she entered the military or at the time of death, whether on active duty or after military retirement or an honorable discharge, may be buried in a state veterans cemetery.

n Spouses, unmarried children under 21 or a child who became incapable of support before 21 also are eligible for burial there.

n For veterans, there is no charge for the grave site, interment services or perpetual care of the site. For family members, the fee for burial is \$300.

n A family may have only one grave site. If a family member dies first, the veteran must agree to be interred in the same plot.

n Veterans may fill out preapplication forms and have everything approved in advance. Amelia has about 2,000 applications on file.

n Cemetery staff typically includes a superintendent, administrative assistant, grounds supervisor and possibly another grounds staff member.